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Editorial
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Second thoughts

A killer who says he was raped deserves clemency

In Harrisburg this morning, the Pennsylvania Board of Pardons will decide whether to reconsider a plea for clemency from a convicted killer that it recently rejected. If it decides to do so, it will hold a hearing before taking another vote.

Here is an opportunity for wise second thoughts. Unless a judge in Philadelphia intervenes with a ruling expected on Friday, Terrance Williams will become next Wednesday the first Pennsylvania inmate since 1999 to be executed by the state (and the first since 1963 of those who contested the death penalty).

That Terrance Williams, 46, is a killer is not in doubt. He was convicted of first-degree murder, robbery and conspiracy in the death of Amos Norwood in Philadelphia in 1986.

Ordinarily, he'd be a prime candidate for execution for those who back the death penalty - but nothing about his case is ordinary. He claims he was raped as a youth by several men, including the one he was charged with killing and another he killed earlier.

Prosecutors contend these claims came late in the judicial process and that he is lying to save his skin. Possibly, but many people believe him or are prepared to take the chance that he is telling the truth. Some members of the jury who convicted him have said that had they known of the rape allegations, they would not have voted for the death penalty.

That is the humane response now. If he is a victim of sexual abuse and he is executed rather than made to spend life in prison without parole, that sentence would be its own injustice.

When they last voted, the board favored clemency by 3-2, with Attorney General Linda Kelly in the majority. The vote, however, had to be unanimous. Following the counsel of head and heart, the board can do the right thing on the second attempt.